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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 001094

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - AMBASSADOR'S INITIAL MEETING WITH FOREIGN MINISTER ZARIFI.

REF: STATE 95019,

CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, Ambassador, EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a 40-minute initial meeting, Foreign Minister Zarifi complained to Ambassador Gross about Tajikistan's lack of success in obtaining high-level meetings with the USG, either in Washington or in Dushanbe. He also pressed for a second U.S.-funded bridge to Afghanistan, for more Northern Distribution Network (NDN) traffic to transit Tajikistan, for the USG to purchase Tajik goods to supply forces in Afghanistan, and for U.S. support in international financial institutions. Zarifi summed up his view of bilateral relations by saying that he perceived problems in an overall good relationship, and that the underlying issue was that the U.S. did not value and respond appropriately to Tajikistan's consistent cooperation and friendship. Zarifi was non-committal when the Ambassador inquired whether he would be able to present his credentials to the President before he departs for UNGA on September 20. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On September 18 Foreign Minister Zarifi received Ambassador Gross, who handed him a copy of his credentials. After this brief ceremony Zarifi opened the discussion with compliments for previous U.S. ambassadors and the observation that bilateral relations were excellent.

THERE ARE A FEW ISSUES, SIR

¶3. (C) Zarifi then added that he wished he had been able to get high-level meetings in Washington on his upcoming visit to the U.S. for UNGA, and said the lack of success in arranging appropriate meetings had led him to cancel his trip to Washington altogether. He urged the USG to respond quickly to Tajik meeting requests as they arose during UNGA. More broadly, he commented that while the USG gave much assistance to Tajikistan, it did not support Tajikistan in the IMF nor in providing high level meetings to Tajik leaders. Zarifi did not understand the reason for U.S. resistance to Tajikistan's interests in the IMF, and reluctance to meet at the head of state level, since Tajikistan "always supported you in Central Asia and never made problems for you." "We want our relationship to adequately reflect what we do for you," he said.

¶4. (C) Zarifi compared Tajikistan's failure to get presidential or secretary-level meetings with his relatively easy access to

European foreign ministers, with whom he had recently met in Brussels. He said Uzbekistan enjoyed better access to Washington leaders, despite having created major problems for the United States in the region, and compared the construction of the Termez - Mazar e Sharif rail line with the few trucks which had transited Tajikistan as part of NDN. Kyrgyzstan too benefited more from its support for Afghan operations than Tajikistan did, including in contracts for Kyrgyz companies. He urged the USG to buy water and boxed juice from Tajik producers.

15. (C) Ambassador heard out this litany and made several points in reply. Thanking Zarifi for Tajikistan's support for Afghan operations and for NDN, he said he had discussed local purchase of supplies with General Petraeus, and that the USG was considering ways to expand NDN activities.

16. (C) On the IMF, Ambassador noted that it was important that Tajikistan clear up doubts among donors, and so it should share the results of the audits of Barki Tojik, the National Bank, and when completed, the Talco audit with donors and the public.

17. (C) Ambassador said the Obama administration would increase high-level contacts with Central Asia. The Annual Bilateral Consultations would be one means to do so, in addition to President Rahmon's meeting with Secretary Clinton at UNGA. (Zarifi interjected that he was "a little bit jealous" of the Uzbeks for what he perceived as their better access in Washington.)

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WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR? IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN

18. (C) Zarifi noted Tajikistan's good relations with President Karzai and with Tajik opposition figures in northern Afghanistan, saying that the United States could make more use of Tajikistan's cultural and political ties to Afghanistan. The same held true with Iran, with which Tajikistan shared a common language and close ties, but the USG did not ask Tajikistan to help in these areas. The Europeans, on the other hand, did seek Tajikistan's advice in dealing with Afghanistan. Ambassador reminded Zarifi of the demarches delivered earlier in the week (reftels), asking Tajikistan's help by remaining silent about Afghan election results until the results were certified, and by urging Iran to participate seriously in P5+1 talks.

19. (C) Zarifi replied that Tajikistan knew better than most countries what should be done with Iran. He also commented that in Afghanistan, President Karzai had received bad advice to select General Dostum as one of his Vice-Presidential running mates, as Dostum was useful only "for organizing war." Zarifi suggested Uzbekistan had a role in this decision. He then raised the request for a second U.S.-funded bridge to Afghanistan, saying the U.S. did not understand how important this would be to connect Afghan Badakhshan to the outside world. Ambassador said the USG would continue to turn to Tajikistan for advice and assistance with both countries. He asked Zarifi to help make it as easy as possible to conduct joint training of Afghan and Tajik border guards.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

¶10. (C) Ambassador raised Trafficking in Persons (TIP), noting that Tajikistan had barely avoided a Tier 3 ranking in 2009, and that Tajikistan needed to take concrete measures to avoid Tier 3 next year. Forced labor in the cotton sector was a particular problem, but he was encouraged by recent statements by the Ministers of Agriculture and Education against requiring students to pick cotton. Zarifi replied that Tajikistan was doing much to fight TIP, the President was personally interested in the subject and the Ministry of Interior was engaged too, but Tajikistan needed more assistance in this area.

PEACE CORPS

¶11. (C) Ambassador also asked for Tajik high-level support to bring a Peace Corps mission to Tajikistan, and said such a mission would have long term benefits for both countries. President Rahmon would need to make a request to the U.S. to push this process along.

ELECTIONS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

¶12. (C) The U.S., OSCE, and others were concerned about the new law on religion and how it could be applied, Ambassador said. Tajikistan should review the law and see how it could be adjusted to protect religious freedom without becoming an instrument of oppression. The U.S. and other countries were also very interested in the conduct of the February 2010 parliamentary elections. They were concerned by news that the Government of Tajikistan had formally recommended against draft electoral legislation that would have improved electoral procedures in accordance with recommendations from the OSCE and opposition political parties. The U.S. wanted to assist Tajikistan to conduct the elections fairly. Zarifi only nodded.

¶13. (C) Ambassador concluded his remarks by noting that Annual Bilateral Consultations would be a good opportunity to review these and other issues with the attendance of other government agencies. Zarifi said he looked forward to further discussions

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after he returned from UNGA on September 27.

CREDENTIALING WHEN?

¶14. (C) Ambassador asked that the MFA arrange his presentation of credentials to take place before President Rahmon left for New York on September 20, noting that it would be awkward if Secretary Clinton met with Rahmon before Rahmon had received the Ambassador in Dushanbe. Zarifi noncommittally replied that he would "see what can be done." (Embassy had heard earlier in the day from the Chief of Protocol that the credentials ceremony would not take place until after Rahmon's return from UNGA; he urged Ambassador to push Zarifi for an earlier date.)

COMMENT: IT'S PERSONAL, BABY

¶15. (C) Notable in this meeting was Zarifi's frustration with his inability to get meetings with President Obama or Vice President Biden, for himself or for President Rahmon, and his perceived difficulty in getting a meeting with Secretary Clinton. Zarifi returned to this theme several times during a fairly short meeting, and seemed unconstrained by the presence on either side of him of his senior staff, including presidential daughter Ozoda Rahmonova. Rahmon meets with visiting U.S. officials from the DAS level and up, and Zarifi's comments on this status issue may well reflect Rahmon's sense of being slighted too. It may also explain the delay in scheduling the presentation of credentials to Rahmon. And it highlights the importance in Central Asia of personal contacts between government leaders and the sense of prestige they derive from such meetings. In the case of UNGA, high-level meetings with USG officials will help Tajikistan show its neighbors, and Russia, that it matters too. End Comment.
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